

# Techie Tips for Travelers

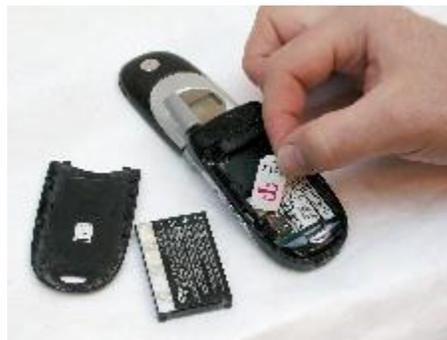
By Rick Steves



When traveling with an iPhone, it's best to disable data roaming and use Wi-Fi to surf the Internet. (Credit: ETBD)



Wireless hotspots in different European cities allow you to get online from a park bench. (Credit: ETBD)



As you cross the border with your mobile phone, you can save a chunk of change by swapping in a new SIM card, purchased from the country you're in. (Credit: ETBD)

With my mantra being "Pack Light," I used to be against packing electronics of any kind. But now, I bring my laptop, iPod, digital camera, and mobile phone to Europe. With hotels retiring their fax machines in favor of email, mobile phones getting cheaper and easier to buy, and Wi-Fi hotspots popping up everywhere, it's never been simpler to get connected.

There are plenty of Internet cafés in Europe. Large European chains such as [easyInternetcafé.com](http://easyInternetcafé.com) offer inexpensive access in big cities. Even small towns have some way to get online — at hostels, hotels, libraries, bookstores, post offices, and so on. If you plan to check your email using a public machine, make sure you sign up for a Web-based account, such as [Yahoo.com](http://Yahoo.com), [Hotmail.com](http://Hotmail.com), or [Gmail.com](http://Gmail.com).

If you tote your own laptop, you'll find that many hotels and cafés offer wireless access — sometimes it's free, other times, you'll have to buy a drink or pay a fee — while some towns have Wi-Fi hotspots scattered around highly trafficked areas. Just pay for a password, park yourself on a bench in your favorite idyllic spot — overlooking a sandy beach, on a floodlit piazza, or along a bustling people-watching boulevard — then log on and surf away.

I like to bring an iPod to listen to my favorite music and shows that I've downloaded at home. **[My website, ricksteves.com, offers free audio tours of Europe's major sights plus hundreds of hours of my public-radio shows on travel.](http://ricksteves.com)**

If you're packing a digital camera, your biggest challenge will be storing photos. Buy the biggest memory card you can afford (or get two). Memory cards are available in Europe, but they're more expensive. I travel with a six-megapixel camera and a two-gigabyte memory card. Taking photos at high resolution, I can fit about 500 photos onto my memory card. Since I usually travel with a laptop, I upload my photos to my computer. Without a laptop, you could empty — or copy — your memory card as you go, by getting your images burned to a CD (European photo stores and Internet cafés charge \$7–10 for this service).

It's handy to travel with a mobile phone, whether you're calling a hotel for directions or getting in touch with that lost travel buddy who missed the train. If you want to use a mobile phone in Europe, you have two choices: Take your own, or buy one once you're there. While many American cell phones work overseas (especially T-Mobile and AT&T handsets), the per-minute cost adds up. Save money by purchasing a phone when you arrive. You can buy a phone for about \$40 to \$75 — which usually includes some prepaid calling time — at the ubiquitous corner phone marts or at mobile-phone counters in big department stores. You'll pay cheaper in-country rates and feel like a local with your own European phone number.

Ideally, you want to buy a phone that's unlocked so you can switch out SIM cards as you travel to different countries. A SIM card is a small, fingernail-size chip that stores your phone number and other information. The EU is looking into standardizing roaming fees across Europe. But for now, when you cross a border, it's best to buy a new SIM card, which you can get from newsstands kiosks and even vending machines at train stations for \$10 to \$20.

Users of some handheld wireless devices (most notably the iPhone) have returned home to astronomical bills for unintentional roaming. Just watching a three-minute video on YouTube in the London Tube can cost about \$40. You can pay extra for international access, but you're better off disabling the data-roaming feature on your device altogether and getting online at public Wi-Fi points to check email and surf the Web.

If you're traveling with your laptop, the cheapest way to talk to loved ones back home is via VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol). VoIP lets you converse with people around the world over the Internet for free. The two main services are [Skype.com](http://Skype.com) and [Google.com/talk](http://Google.com/talk). Computer-to-computer calls are always free, and the sound quality is about as good as a standard phone connection. If your computer doesn't have a microphone, you may have to buy an operator-type headset for about \$20.

If you'd rather blog, look into [Travelpod.com](http://Travelpod.com), [Mytripjournal.com](http://Mytripjournal.com), and [Realtravel.com](http://Realtravel.com). These sites are specialized for travelers, providing custom maps with virtual pins for the places you've visited. Some sites send emails informing your friends when your blog is updated, and allow them to post comments (so expect a ribbing for those blurry Eiffel Tower photos).

I've just been cruising through several European countries, communicating with friends, family, and office workers with my laptop and mobile phone. My days of chatting in noisy, smelly phone booths are long over.

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